

THE AMERICAN YAWP

1. The New World

III. European Expansion

Scandinavian seafarers reached the New World long before Columbus. At their peak they sailed as far east as Constantinople and raided settlements as far south as North Africa. They established limited colonies in Iceland and Greenland and, around the year 1000, Leif Erikson reached Newfoundland in present-day Canada. But the Norse colony failed. Culturally and geographically isolated, the Norse were driven back to the sea by some combination of limited resources, inhospitable weather, food shortages, and Native resistance.

Then, centuries before Columbus, the Crusades linked Europe with the wealth, power, and knowledge of Asia. Europeans rediscovered or adopted Greek, Roman, and Muslim knowledge. The hemispheric dissemination of goods and knowledge not only sparked the Renaissance but fueled long-term European expansion. Asian goods flooded European markets, creating a demand for new commodities. This trade created vast new wealth, and Europeans battled one another for trade supremacy.

European nation-states consolidated under the authority of powerful kings. A series of military conflicts between England and France—the Hundred Years’ War—accelerated nationalism and cultivated the financial and military administration necessary to maintain nation-states. In Spain, the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile consolidated the two most powerful kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula. The Crusades had never ended in Iberia: the Spanish crown concluded centuries of intermittent warfare—the Reconquista—by expelling Muslim Moors and Iberian Jews from the Iberian peninsula in 1492, just as Christopher Columbus sailed west. With new power, these new nations—and their newly empowered monarchs—yearned to access the wealth of Asia.

Seafaring Italian traders commanded the Mediterranean and controlled trade with Asia. Spain and Portugal, at the edges of Europe, relied on middlemen and paid higher prices for Asian goods. They sought a more direct route. And so they looked to the Atlantic. Portugal invested heavily in exploration. From his estate on the Sagres Peninsula of Portugal, a rich sailing port, Prince Henry the Navigator (Infante Henry, Duke of Viseu) invested in research and technology and underwrote many technological breakthroughs. His investments bore fruit. In the fifteenth century, Portuguese sailors perfected the astrolabe, a tool to calculate latitude, and the caravel, a ship well suited for ocean exploration. Both were technological breakthroughs. The astrolabe allowed for precise navigation, and the caravel, unlike more common vessels designed for trading on the relatively placid Mediterranean, was a rugged ship with a deep draft capable of making lengthy voyages on the open ocean and, equally important, carrying large amounts of cargo while doing so.



Engraving of sixteenth century Lisbon from Civitatis Orbis Terrarum, "The Cities of the World," ed. Georg Braun (Cologne: 1572). [Wikimedia](#).

Blending economic and religious motivations, the Portuguese established forts along the Atlantic coast of Africa during the fifteenth century, inaugurating centuries of European colonization there. Portuguese trading posts generated new profits that funded further trade and further colonization. Trading posts spread across the vast coastline of Africa, and by the end of the fifteenth century, Vasco da Gama leapfrogged his way around the coasts of Africa to reach India and other lucrative Asian markets.

The vagaries of ocean currents and the limits of contemporary technology forced Iberian sailors to sail west into the open sea before cutting back east to Africa. So doing, the Spanish and Portuguese stumbled on several islands off the coast of Europe and Africa, including the Azores, the Canary Islands, and the Cape Verde Islands. They became training grounds for the later colonization of the Americas and saw the first large-scale cultivation of sugar by enslaved laborers.

Sugar was originally grown in Asia but became a popular, widely profitable luxury item consumed by the nobility of Europe. The Portuguese began growing sugarcane along the Mediterranean, but sugar was a difficult crop. It required tropical temperatures, daily rainfall, unique soil conditions, and a fourteen-month growing season. But on the Atlantic islands, the Portuguese had found new land to support sugar production. New patterns of human and ecological destruction followed. Isolated from the mainlands of Europe and Africa for millennia, island natives—known as the Guanches—were enslaved or perished soon after Europeans arrived. Portugal's would-be planters needed laborers to cultivate the difficult, labor-intensive crop. Portuguese merchants, who had recently established good relations with powerful African kingdoms such as Kongo, Ndongo, and Songhai, looked then to African slaves. Slavery had long existed among African societies. African leaders traded war captives—who by custom forfeited their freedom in battle—for Portuguese guns, iron, and manufactured goods. From bases along the Atlantic coast, the largest in modern-day Nigeria, the Portuguese began purchasing slaves for export to the Atlantic islands to work the sugar fields. Thus were born the first great Atlantic plantations.



By the fifteenth century, the Portuguese had established forts and colonies on islands and along the rim of the Atlantic Ocean; other major European countries soon followed in step. An anonymous cartographer created this map known as the Cantino Map, the earliest known map of European exploration in the New World, to depict these holdings and argue for the greatness of his native Portugal. Cantino planisphere (1502), Biblioteca Estense, Modena, Italy. [Wikimedia](#).

Spain, too, stood on the cutting edge of maritime technology. Spanish sailors had become masters of the caravels. As Portugal consolidated control over African trading networks and the circuitous eastbound sea route to Asia, Spain yearned for its own path to empire. Christopher Columbus, a skilled Italian-born sailor who had studied under Portuguese navigators, promised just that opportunity.

Educated Asians and Europeans of the fifteenth century knew the world was round. They also knew that while it was therefore technically possible to reach Asia by sailing west from Europe—thereby avoiding Italian or Portuguese middlemen—the earth's vast size would doom even the greatest caravels to starvation and thirst long before they ever reached their destination. But Columbus underestimated the size of the globe by a full two thirds and therefore believed it was possible. After unsuccessfully shopping his proposed expedition in several European courts, he convinced Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain to provide him three small ships, which set sail in 1492. Columbus was both confoundingly wrong about the size of the earth and spectacularly lucky that two large continents lurked in his path. On October 12, 1492, after two

months at sea, the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María* and their ninety men landed in the modern-day Bahamas.

The indigenous Arawaks, or Taíno, populated the Caribbean islands. They fished and grew corn, yams, and cassava. Columbus described them as innocents. “They are very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil; nor the sins of murder or theft,” he reported to the Spanish crown. “Your highness may believe that in all the world there can be no better people. . . . They love their neighbors as themselves, and their speech is the sweetest and gentlest in the world, and always with a smile.” But Columbus had come for wealth and he could find little. The Arawaks, however, wore small gold ornaments. Columbus left thirty-nine Spaniards at a military fort on Hispaniola to find and secure the source of the gold while he returned to Spain, with a dozen captured and branded Arawaks. Columbus arrived to great acclaim and quickly worked to outfit a return voyage. Spain’s New World motives were clear from the beginning. If outfitted for a return voyage, Columbus promised the Spanish crown gold and slaves. Columbus reported, “With fifty men they can all be subjugated and made to do what is required of them.”²¹

Columbus was outfitted with seventeen ships and over one thousand men to return to the West Indies (Columbus made four voyages to the New World). Still believing he had landed in the East Indies, he promised to reward Isabella and Ferdinand’s investment. But when material wealth proved slow in coming, the Spanish embarked on a vicious campaign to extract every possible ounce of wealth from the Caribbean. The Spanish decimated the Arawaks. Bartolomé de Las Casas traveled to the New World in 1502 and later wrote, “I saw with these Eyes of mine the Spaniards for no other reason, but only to gratify their bloody mindedness, cut off the Hands, Noses, and Ears, both of Indians and Indianesses.”²² When the enslaved Indians exhausted the islands’ meager gold reserves, the Spaniards forced them to labor on their huge new estates, the *encomiendas*. Las Casas described European barbarities in cruel detail. By presuming the natives had no humanity, the Spaniards utterly abandoned theirs. Casual violence and dehumanizing exploitation ravaged the Arawaks. The Indian population collapsed. Within a few generations the whole island of Hispaniola had been depopulated and a whole people exterminated. Historians’ estimates of the island’s pre-contact population range from fewer than one million to as many as eight million (Las Casas estimated it at three million). In a few short

years, they were gone. “Who in future generations will believe this?” Las Casas wondered. “I myself writing it as a knowledgeable eyewitness can hardly believe it.”

Despite the diversity of Native populations and the existence of several strong empires, Native Americans were wholly unprepared for the arrival of Europeans. Biology magnified European cruelties. Cut off from the Old World, its domesticated animals, and its immunological history, Native Americans lived free from the terrible diseases that ravaged populations in Asia, Europe and Africa. But their blessing now became a curse. Native Americans lacked the immunities that Europeans and Africans had developed over centuries of deadly epidemics, and so when Europeans arrived, carrying smallpox, typhus, influenza, diphtheria, measles, and hepatitis, plagues decimated Native communities.²³ Many died in war and slavery, but millions died in epidemics. All told, in fact, some scholars estimate that as much as 90 percent of the population of the Americas perished within the first century and a half of European contact.²⁴

Though ravaged by disease and warfare, Native Americans forged middle grounds, resisted with violence, accommodated and adapted to the challenges of colonialism, and continued to shape the patterns of life throughout the New World for hundreds of years. But the Europeans kept coming.

IV. Spanish Exploration and Conquest

As news of the Spanish conquest spread, wealth-hungry Spaniards poured into the New World seeking land, gold, and titles. A New World empire spread from Spain’s Caribbean foothold. Motives were plain: said one soldier, “we came here to serve God and the king, and also to get rich.”²⁵ Mercenaries joined the conquest and raced to capture the human and material wealth of the New World.

The Spanish managed labor relations through a legal system known as the *encomienda*, an exploitive feudal arrangement in which Spain tied Indian laborers to vast estates. In the *encomienda*, the Spanish crown granted a person not only land but a specified number of natives as well. *Encomenderos* brutalized their laborers. After Bartolomé de Las Casas published

his incendiary account of Spanish abuses (*The Destruction of the Indies*), Spanish authorities abolished the *encomienda* in 1542 and replaced it with the *repartimiento*. Intended as a milder system, the *repartimiento* nevertheless replicated many of the abuses of the older system, and the rapacious exploitation of the Native population continued as Spain spread its empire over the Americas.



El Castillo (pyramid of Kukulcán) in Chichén Itzá. Photograph by Daniel Schwen. [Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#).

As Spain's New World empire expanded, Spanish conquerors met the massive empires of Central and South America, civilizations that dwarfed anything found in North America. In Central America the Maya built massive temples, sustained large populations, and constructed a complex and long-lasting civilization with a written language, advanced mathematics, and stunningly accurate calendars. But Maya civilization, although it had not disappeared, nevertheless collapsed before European arrival, likely because of droughts and unsustainable agricultural practices. But the eclipse of the Maya only heralded the later rise of the most powerful Native civilization ever seen in the Western Hemisphere: the Aztecs.

Militaristic migrants from northern Mexico, the Aztecs moved south into the Valley of Mexico, conquered their way to dominance, and built the largest empire in the New World. When the

Spaniards arrived in Mexico they found a sprawling civilization centered around Tenochtitlán, an awe-inspiring city built on a series of natural and man-made islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco, located today within modern-day Mexico City. Tenochtitlán, founded in 1325, rivaled the world's largest cities in size and grandeur. Much of the city was built on large artificial islands called *chinampas*, which the Aztecs constructed by dredging mud and rich sediment from the bottom of the lake and depositing it over time to form new landscapes. A massive pyramid temple, the Templo Mayor, was located at the city center (its ruins can still be found in the center of Mexico City). When the Spaniards arrived, they could scarcely believe what they saw: 70,000 buildings, housing perhaps 200,000–250,000 people, all built on a lake and connected by causeways and canals. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a Spanish soldier, later recalled, “When we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments. . . . Some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream? . . . I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about.”²⁶

From their island city the Aztecs dominated an enormous swath of central and southern Mesoamerica. They ruled their empire through a decentralized network of subject peoples that paid regular tribute—including everything from the most basic items, such as corn, beans, and other foodstuffs, to luxury goods such as jade, cacao, and gold—and provided troops for the empire. But unrest festered beneath the Aztecs' imperial power, and European conquerors lusted after its vast wealth.



This sixteenth-century map of Tenochtitlan shows the aesthetic beauty and advanced infrastructure of this great Aztec city. Map, c. 1524, [Wikimedia](#).

Hernán Cortés, an ambitious, thirty-four-year-old Spaniard who had won riches in the conquest of Cuba, organized an invasion of Mexico in 1519. Sailing with six hundred men, horses, and cannon, he landed on the coast of Mexico. Relying on a Native translator, whom he called Doña Marina, and whom Mexican folklore denounces as La Malinche, Cortés gathered information and allies in preparation for conquest. Through intrigue, brutality, and the exploitation of endemic political divisions, he enlisted the aid of thousands of Native allies, defeated Spanish rivals, and marched on Tenochtitlán.

Aztec dominance rested on fragile foundations and many of the region's semi-independent city-states yearned to break from Aztec rule. Nearby kingdoms, including the Tarascans to the north and the remains of Maya city-states on the Yucatán peninsula, chafed at Aztec power.

Through persuasion, and maybe because some Aztecs thought Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl, the Spaniards entered Tenochtitlán peacefully. Cortés then captured the emperor Montezuma and

used him to gain control of the Aztecs' gold and silver reserves and their network of mines. Eventually, the Aztecs revolted. Montezuma was branded a traitor, and uprising ignited the city. Montezuma was killed along with a third of Cortés's men in *la noche triste*, the "night of sorrows." The Spanish fought through thousands of indigenous insurgents and across canals to flee the city, where they regrouped, enlisted more Native allies, captured Spanish reinforcements, and, in 1521, besieged the island city. The Spaniards' eighty-five-day siege cut off food and fresh water. Smallpox ravaged the city. One Spanish observer said it "spread over the people as great destruction. Some it covered on all parts—their faces, their heads, their breasts, and so on. There was great havoc. Very many died of it. . . . They could not move; they could not stir."²⁷ Cortés, the Spaniards, and their Native allies then sacked the city. The temples were plundered and fifteen thousand died. After two years of conflict, a million-person-strong empire was toppled by disease, dissension, and a thousand European conquerors.



The Spanish relied on indigenous allies to defeat the Aztecs. The Tlaxcala were among the most important Spanish allies in their conquest. This nineteenth-century recreation of a sixteenth century drawing depicts Tlaxcalan warriors fighting alongside Spanish soldiers against the Aztec. [Wikimedia](#).

Farther south, along the Andes Mountains in South America, the Quechuas, or Incas, managed a vast mountain empire. From their capital of Cuzco in the Andean highlands, through conquest and negotiation, the Incas built an empire that stretched around the western half of the South American continent from present day Ecuador to central Chile and Argentina. They cut terraces into the sides of mountains to farm fertile soil, and by the 1400s they managed a thousand miles of Andean roads that tied together perhaps twelve million people. But like the Aztecs, unrest between the Incas and conquered groups created tensions and left the empire vulnerable to

invaders. Smallpox spread in advance of Spanish conquerors and hit the Incan empire in 1525. Epidemics ravaged the population, cutting the empire's population in half and killing the Incan emperor Huayna Capac and many members of his family. A bloody war of succession ensued. Inspired by Cortés's conquest of Mexico, Francisco Pizarro moved south and found an empire torn by chaos. With 168 men, he deceived Incan rulers and took control of the empire and seized the capital city, Cuzco, in 1533. Disease, conquest, and slavery ravaged the remnants of the Incan empire.

After the conquests of Mexico and Peru, Spain settled into their new empire. A vast administrative hierarchy governed the new holdings: royal appointees oversaw an enormous territory of landed estates, and Indian laborers and administrators regulated the extraction of gold and silver and oversaw their transport across the Atlantic in Spanish galleons. Meanwhile Spanish migrants poured into the New World. During the sixteenth century alone, 225,000 migrated, and 750,000 came during the entire three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. Spaniards, often single, young, and male, emigrated for the various promises of land, wealth, and social advancement. Laborers, craftsmen, soldiers, clerks, and priests all crossed the Atlantic in large numbers. Indians, however, always outnumbered the Spanish, and the Spaniards, by both necessity and design, incorporated Native Americans into colonial life. This incorporation did not mean equality, however.

An elaborate racial hierarchy marked Spanish life in the New World. Regularized in the mid-1600s but rooted in medieval practices, the Sistema de Castas organized individuals into various racial groups based on their supposed "purity of blood." Elaborate classifications became almost prerequisites for social and political advancement in Spanish colonial society. *Peninsulares*—Iberian-born Spaniards, or *españoles*—occupied the highest levels of administration and acquired the greatest estates. Their descendants, New World-born Spaniards, or *criollos*, occupied the next rung and rivaled the *peninsulares* for wealth and opportunity. *Mestizos*—a term used to describe those of mixed Spanish and Indian heritage—followed.



Castas paintings illustrated the varying degrees of intermixture between colonial subjects, defining them for Spanish officials. Unknown artist, Las Castas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlan, Mexico. [Wikimedia](#).

Like the French later in North America, the Spanish tolerated and sometimes even supported interracial marriage. There were simply too few Spanish women in the New World to support the natural growth of a purely Spanish population. The Catholic Church endorsed interracial marriage as a moral bulwark against bastardy and rape. By 1600, mestizos made up a large portion of the colonial population.²⁸ By the early 1700s, more than one third of all marriages bridged the Spanish-Indian divide. Separated by wealth and influence from the *peninsulares* and *criollos*, mestizos typically occupied a middling social position in Spanish New World society. They were not quite *Indios*, or Indians, but their lack of *limpieza de sangre*, or “pure blood,” removed them from the privileges of full-blooded Spaniards. Spanish fathers of sufficient wealth and influence might shield their mestizo children from racial prejudice, and a number of wealthy mestizos married *españoles* to “whiten” their family lines, but more often mestizos were confined to a middle station in the Spanish New World. Slaves and Indians occupied the lowest rungs of the social ladder.

Many manipulated the Sistema de Casas to gain advantages for themselves and their children. Mestizo mothers, for instance, might insist that their mestizo daughters were actually *castizas*, or quarter-Indians, who, if they married a Spaniard, could, in the eyes of the law, produce “pure” *criollo* children entitled to the full rights and opportunities of Spanish citizens. But

“passing” was an option only for the few. Instead, the massive Native populations within Spain’s New World Empire ensured a level of cultural and racial mixture—or *mestizaje*—unparalleled in British North America. Spanish North America wrought a hybrid culture that was neither fully Spanish nor fully Indian. The Spanish not only built Mexico City atop Tenochtitlán, but food, language, and families were also constructed on indigenous foundations. In 1531, a poor Indian named Juan Diego reported that he was visited by the Virgin Mary, who came as a dark-skinned Nahuatl-speaking Indian.²⁹ Reports of miracles spread across Mexico and the Virgen de Guadalupe became a national icon for a new mestizo society.



Our Lady of Guadalupe is perhaps the most culturally important and extensively reproduced Mexican-Catholic image. In the iconic depiction, Mary stands atop the tilma (peasant cloak) of Juan Diego, on which according to his story appeared the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Throughout Mexican history, the story and image of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been a unifying national symbol. Mexican retablo of Our Lady of Guadalupe, 19th century, in El Paso Museum of Art. [Wikimedia](#).

From Mexico, Spain expanded northward. Lured by the promises of gold and another Tenochtitlán, Spanish expeditions scoured North America for another wealthy Indian empire. Huge expeditions, resembling vast moving communities, composed of hundreds of soldiers, settlers, priests, and slaves, with enormous numbers of livestock, moved across the continent.

Juan Ponce de León, the conqueror of Puerto Rico, landed in Florida in 1513 in search of wealth and slaves. Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca joined the Narváez expedition to Florida a decade later but was shipwrecked and forced to embark on a remarkable multiyear odyssey across the Gulf of Mexico and Texas into Mexico. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565, and it remains the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in the present-day United States.

But without the rich gold and silver mines of Mexico, the plantation-friendly climate of the Caribbean, or the exploitive potential of large Indian empires, North America offered little incentive for Spanish officials. Still, Spanish expeditions combed North America. Francisco Vázquez de Coronado pillaged his way across the Southwest. Hernando de Soto tortured and raped and enslaved his way across the Southeast. Soon Spain had footholds—however tenuous—across much of the continent.

V. Conclusion

The “discovery” of America unleashed horrors. Europeans embarked on a debauching path of death and destructive exploitation that unleashed murder and greed and slavery. But disease was deadlier than any weapon in the European arsenal. It unleashed death on a scale never before seen in human history. Estimates of the population of pre-Columbian America range wildly. Some argue for as much as 100 million, some as low as 2 million. In 1983, Henry Dobyns put the number at 18 million. Whatever the precise estimates, nearly all scholars tell of the utter devastation wrought by European disease. Dobyns estimated that in the first 130 years following European contact, 95 percent of Native Americans perished.³⁰ (At its worst, Europe’s Black Death peaked at death rates of 25 to 33 percent. Nothing else in history rivals the American demographic disaster.) A ten-thousand-year history of disease hit the New World in an instant. Smallpox, typhus, bubonic plague, influenza, mumps, measles: pandemics ravaged populations up and down the continents. Wave after wave of disease crashed relentlessly. Disease flung whole communities into chaos. Others it destroyed completely.

Disease was only the most terrible in a cross-hemispheric exchange of violence, culture, trade, and peoples—the so-called Columbian Exchange—that followed in Columbus's wake. Global diets, for instance, were transformed. The Americas' calorie-rich crops revolutionized Old World agriculture and spawned a worldwide population boom. Many modern associations between food and geography are but products of the Columbian Exchange: potatoes in Ireland, tomatoes in Italy, chocolate in Switzerland, peppers in Thailand, and oranges in Florida are all manifestations of the new global exchange. Europeans, for their part, introduced their domesticated animals to the New World. Pigs ran rampant through the Americas, transforming the landscape as they spread throughout both continents. Horses spread as well, transforming the Native American cultures who adapted to the newly introduced animal. Partly from trade, partly from the remnants of failed European expeditions, and partly from theft, Indians acquired horses and transformed Native American life in the vast North American plains.

The Europeans' arrival bridged two worlds and ten thousand years of history largely separated from each other since the closing of the Bering Strait. Both sides of the world had been transformed. And neither would ever again be the same.